



**File Code:** 1950

**Date:** October 1, 2014

Dear Planning Participant:

The Moose Creek Ranger District is preparing an Environmental Assessment pursuant to the Healthy Forests Restoration Act for fuel reduction activities on approximately 300 acres within the Community Protection Zone of Lowell, Idaho. I welcome your comments and suggestions on the proposed “Lowell WUI” project.

### **Overview**

The residences and private properties in the community of Lowell, Idaho are surrounded by dense forested slopes. Insect and disease activity has increased across much of this area resulting in significant tree mortality. The resultant fuel loadings have created conditions that can contribute to uncontrollable fire behavior.

The Lowell WUI project is designed to create a fuel break where fire fighters can safely defend private properties surrounding the community of Lowell. Additionally, the project would benefit wildlife in the short term by improving winter habitat and create more resilient forested conditions longer term through reforestation with long lived early seral tree species such as ponderosa pine and western white pine.

### **Location**

The project is located in Idaho County, Idaho approximately ½ mile east of the Community of Lowell, Idaho. Lowell is a Federal Register listed “community at risk”. The project occurs within National Forest System lands in T 32 N, R 7 E, secs, 4 and 9, Boise Principle Meridian. Access to the project area is via Forest Road #317 (Coolwater).

The project area occurs on both the Moose Creek and Lochsa Districts. Management Direction for the area is set by the Nez Perce Forest Plan and Clearwater Forest Plan, respectively. The Moose Creek District is the lead on the project.

A portion of the proposed project area occurs within the Rackliff-Gedney Idaho Roadless Area (IRA). This IRA is classified under the Backcountry Restoration and Forest Plan Special Area themes.

A portion of the project area also occurs within Middle Fork Clearwater Lochsa-Selway Wild and Scenic River System (WSR). The river segment within the project area is classified as “recreational”.



The Project occurs within the Selway-Middle Fork Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project area.

## **Purpose and Need**

### **Hazardous Fuels Reduction**

**Purpose:** Reduce hazardous fuels within designated Wildland Urban Interface lands.

**Need:** There is a need to enhance wildfire suppression capability by reducing fuel loads and the potential for crown fire adjacent to the community of Lowell, Idaho and associated private lands and structures within close proximity to Lowell. This will increase public and firefighter safety in the event of a wildfire and minimize the risk and cost of large fires threatening resources, life and property. As an example, the Johnson Bar fire, started, August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014 has burned over 12,000 acres to-date. That fire, located directly across the river and in the same forest conditions, escaped initial attack due to its location in heavy fuels that were a product of insect and disease activity. Due to a lack of suppression options, firefighters were forced to back off to the river and burn off (including several hundred acres of private ground) in order to safely contain that fire. Above the community of Lowell, slopes have continuous forest cover from the river to the ridgetop. Insect activity has created heavy fuel loadings in many places. Besides for the Coolwater road, there are few geographic or man-made features that would be effective in slowing or stopping fire spread. Downhill and cross-slope fire spread are common in this area, particularly at the Selway – Lochsa confluence where terrain can create strong wind eddies.

### **Vegetation Management**

**Purpose:** Improve forest health.

**Need:** There is a need to manage for forest vegetative conditions that are more resilient to insects, disease and fire. This can be accomplished by: (a) reducing vegetative density to allow for increased tree vitality by reducing competition; (b) focusing on a tree species mix to retain the largest, most healthy ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir and western redcedar while reducing the grand fir and smaller Douglas-fir component and (c) maintaining the more fire and disease resistant tree species on this landscape.

## **Proposed Action**

The District is proposing to use a combination of commercial timber harvest, mastication, prescribed fire and hand pruning to reduce fuels on approximately 300 acres surrounding the private properties and improve forest health. Commercial timber harvest would use variable retention regeneration silvicultural prescriptions using conventional ground based and skyline logging systems. Variable retention harvest would generally retain all “legacy trees” (trees that survived the last fire event) as well as early seral species such as ponderosa pine, western white pine. In addition, variable retention harvest would generally retain 14-30 trees per acre distributed in clumps for future snag and woody debris recruitment as well as wildlife habitat. Tree retention generally favors the largest and healthiest trees, as appropriate for the site. Harvest units are likely to exceed 40 acres.

Harvested areas would be replanted with long lived early seral species such as ponderosa pine and western white pine. Reforestation would occur at lighter stocking rates in order to preserve fuel reduction benefits while still transitioning future forests towards more resilient tree species.

Activity generated fuels (slash) would be treated mechanically through mastication or excavator piling followed by prescribed fire. Hand pruning and piling of non-merchantable material may occur along the road within the project area.

Approximately 130 acres of harvest are proposed within the Rackliff-Gedney IRA. This area was included because the ridge along the north portion of the project area (see map) is a geographic feature that aids in creating an effective fire break and provides fuels reductions on all sides of the private properties. Not including this area would minimize the fuel reduction benefits of the project. The cutting, sale, or removal of timber is permissible in Idaho Roadless Areas designated as Backcountry/Restoration only: *To reduce hazardous fuel conditions within the community protection zone if in the responsible official's judgment the project generally retains large trees as appropriate for the forest type and is consistent with land management plan components as provided for in § 294.28(d) (36 CFR 294.24(c)(1)(i))*

Approximately ¼ mile of ridgetop temporary road would be constructed with the Rackliff-Gedney IRA (see map 2). The road would be decommissioned and placed back to a natural state upon completion of harvest activities. Temporary road construction is addressed in the Idaho Roadless Rule at 36 CFR §294.23 (b)(2) *A responsible official may authorize temporary road construction or road reconstruction for community protection zone activities pursuant to § 294.24(c)(1)(i) if in the official's judgment the community protection objectives cannot be reasonably accomplished without a temporary road.* The Interdisciplinary Team will evaluate whether a temporary road or a skid trail will be less impacting to the Roadless values.

Approximately 40 acres of harvest are proposed within the Wild and Scenic River (WSR) corridor. WSR designations do not preclude timber harvest and project design would include measures to protect the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of the corridor in this area.

This project was first introduced at a community meeting held at the Fenn Ranger Station on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2014. Approximately 15 community members attended and were supportive of the project. Several even requested that the project size be increased. An additional community meeting to discuss the project was held on Sept 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014. Approximately 20 people attended and again expressed support for the project. The Forests published a news release on September 9<sup>th</sup> announcing a final community meeting on September 17<sup>th</sup> to discuss the proposal and solicit input towards the project. Approximately 15 people attended. The Forests gave a power point presentation about the project and answered questions and received comments towards the proposal. There were no issues or concerns brought up at the meeting and everyone in attendance was supportive of the project.

## **Project Design**

The following design measures would be incorporated into the project to minimize the environmental and social effects of the project.

**Roadless** – The project, as currently proposed, would affect less than 0.2% of the Rackliff-Gedney IRA. The temporary road constructed for the project would be decommissioned and placed back into a natural state upon completion of harvest activities. This project is part of a broader landscape strategy and the proposed treatment will facilitate safer implementation of the Coolwater and Fenn Face prescribed fires to reduce fuel loads across the greater roadless area.

**Visuals/WSR** – Tree retention would be variable and in clumps with increased retention in visually sensitive areas. Units would not likely be highly visible to casual observers. The Districts are experienced with harvest layout in the WSR to minimize visual effects. For example the Interface Fuels project on the Lochsa Ranger District.

**Old growth and riparian areas** – Stand exams have indicated there is no old growth or “step down” old growth in the proposed project area. There would be no harvest within Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas.

**Social and recreation** – The project would be scheduled to occur at a time of year when use of the Coolwater road is minimal and seasonal residents adjacent to the project have left for the year. There is likely to be a closure of the Coolwater road during harvest, but the duration is expected to be short.

**Wildlife and fish** – Preliminary analysis indicates that there is no habitat for Threatened or Endangered wildlife species and no fish bearing streams within the proposed project area.

## **Request for Public Scoping Comments**

I recognize the many interests and concerns the public has regarding management on National Forest lands and this is why I am requesting your comments concerning the Lowell WUI project proposal.

To assure your written comments are fully considered during the analysis of this project, please submit your comments within 30 days of the publication of the Legal Notice in the Lewiston Morning Tribune. Comments submitted after that date will be accepted, but our ability to respond effectively could be reduced.

Comments may be submitted in writing, orally, or through electronic means. Those who respond to this invitation for comments will be notified when the Environmental Assessment for this project is available for a forty-five day public comment period.

Please address written comments to: Joe Hudson, Moose Creek District Ranger, 831 Selway Road, Kooskia, ID 83539.

Electronic comments may be submitted to [comments-northern-nezperce-moose-creek@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-northern-nezperce-moose-creek@fs.fed.us). The subject line must contain the name of the project for which you are submitting comments (i.e. Lowell

WUI Project). Acceptable formats are MS Word, Word Perfect, or RTF. When commenting, please include the following: (1) your name, address, and (if possible) your telephone number, and organization represented, (if any); (2) title of the document on which you are submitting comments (Lowell WUI); (3) specific facts and related rationale concerning this project that you feel should be considered.

Should you have questions or need further information, please contact Amy Powers, Interdisciplinary Team Leader, at the Kooskia Ranger Station (208-926-6431). Thank you for your interest in this project.

Sincerely,

Joe Hudson  
Moose Creek District Ranger

Enclosure: map

**Lowell WUI Project**  
**Moose Creek / Lochsa RDs**  
**Nez Perce - Clearwater Forests**  
**Proposed Fuel Break Areas**

